WESTERN PACIFIC.

REPORT

BY

Mr. ARTHUR MAHAFFY

ON A

VISIT TO THE GILBERT AND ELLICE ISLANDS, 1909.

THE ACTING HIGH COMMISSIONER to THE SECRETARY OF STATE.

(Received 10 August, 1909.)

(Extract.)

Office of the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific,
Suva, Fiji, 10th July, 1909.

I HAVE the honour to forward herewith a copy of a report, with enclosures, by Mr. Mahaffy, Assistant to the High Commissioner, on his recent visit of inspection to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorates.

The varied and complete information regarding the Protectorate afforded in the report should prove of great value to Mr. Campbell's successor.

Enclosure.

REPORT by Mr. MAHAFFY, Assistant to the High Commissioner, on the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorates.

Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorates,
Resident Commissioner's Office,
Ocean Island, 11th March, 1909.

SIR,

I HAVE the honour to submit, for the information of Your Excellency, a general report of a visit of inspection paid to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorates in the months of January, February, and March of this year.

2. I arrived at Ocean Island on January 18th, and after making such arrangements as seemed adequate for the discharge of such duties as might be necessary during my absence, I left the same afternoon, taking with me Mr. Best, whose services as an accountant I desired, in order to attempt to obtain a clear and definite idea as to the financial system upon which native taxes are collected in the various islands of the Protectorate. I may say that Mr. Best was of great service to me, and that his examination of the books kept by each native Government upon each different island was most useful, since it revealed certain errors in the methods of keeping accounts, though I am happy to say that in no single instance was any deficiency in the money detected, a circumstance which, I submit, redounds greatly to the credit of the native officials concerned.

3. The fact is more remarkable in view of the very few, short, and irregular visits of inspection which have been possible under the former Protectorate Government. Many islands had not been seen for over a year by any Government official—I do not think that a complete visitation of the Ellice group, in which each

individual island was inspected, has been made for at least eight years. And since the proclamation of the Protectorate, I very much doubt whether any Government official has ever spent twenty-four hours in one visit to any island in that group.

4. Means of inter-island communication have been somewhat more plentiful in the Gilbert Islands, but even there, save in the northern islands and in Mr. Murdoch's district, visits from Government officials have been rare and usually confined to a few hours at any one time.

5. I am happy to think that under the new system, and with the services of the Government steamer, it will be possible for the Resident Commissioner to visit every island in the Protectorate two or three times each year, while the District Magistrates should be able to keep in close touch with the several islands under their respective jurisdictions.

6. It would be well if the only defect in the past administration of the group were that consequent on the difficulties of travel and communication, but I feel it my duty to record in this despatch, for Your Excellency's information, the unfortunate conditions in which the administration has been carried on in the past.

7. It would be difficult to praise too highly the work done by the late Resident Commissioner, Mr. W. Telfer Campbell. In the face of difficulties which might well have appeared insuperable, with a limited staff, and in an enervating tropical climate, he has produced an improvement in the domestic conditions of the Gilbert Islands which can only be fully realized by a person who has seen these islands at the beginning of his term of office.

8. Sir Everard im Thurn has described the social condition of these islanders in pre-Protectorate times. They were a particularly quarrelsome race, and a state of war existed almost permanently upon most of the larger islands of the group—in which the two main divisions of the islands were pitted against each other. Murders were a common occurrence; and affrays, which resulted in the severe wounding of numbers of the different factions, were marked by the destruction of the food crops of the vanquished by the victors, and the consequent reduction of numbers of these unfortunates to a condition bordering on starvation.

9. These conditions are now completely changed. The islands are kept in the most perfect order, trees are continually being planted, land reclaimed, and the wants of the natives are ministered to by every means which the physical peculiarities of these extraordinary islands render possible. Extreme poverty is almost unknown; every man is secure in the possession of his pieces of land, and is protected from the aggression of, or spoliation by, his more powerful neighbours from which he suffered so much in the past. The taxes which are levied on the population, and which form a burden in no case too heavy to be easily borne, are used for the improvement of the islands, for a reserve in case of drought or other disaster, a small portion only of the taxes of each island going to the general revenue of the Protectorate.

10. I have not heard a single complaint against the incidence of the taxation, which is assessed in the form of a graduated land tax, so that the wealthier members of the community pay in proportion to their land holdings, while the poorer people pay a merely nominal amount. The institution of the Island Fund, which is the balance left over from the total taxation of each island after deducting the King's tax and the actual cost of the native administration, has been of the greatest possible value, and may, in event of any catastrophe, prove the salvation of the race. The Native Police on the whole are efficient, and are at least well adapted to the needs and understandings of these simple people, and suffice to enforce the simple code of island laws by which they are governed in the conduct of their everyday affairs.

11. It would be unreasonable to expect that among the native officials, who have been subject to so little supervision in the past, no cases of favouritism or of petty tyranny should ever occur, but such cases are very rare and, on the whole, the poorly paid, uneducated native official does his duty well and truly, and, in the case of those who have charge of considerable sums of money, with an honesty as remarkable as it is wholly admirable.

12. The credit for the attainment of these remarkable results is due in the main to the work of the late Resident Commissioner, very ably seconded, where it has been possible, by the work of Mr. Murdoch—the results of whose untiring labours may be seen on the islands of Apemama, Nonouti, and Tabiteuea, where the natives are better looked after than on any other islands of the group.

13. The greatest difference which I noted after 13 years' absence from the

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Protectorate was the excellent housing accommodation on almost all the islands of the Gilbert Group. A system of extraordinary uniformity has been developed and the best types of native houses have been finally evolved after a series of experiments which may have been somewhat exasperating to the natives but which have undoubtedly resulted in their general good. The villages are kept in admirable order and the roads are scrupulously clean. Hospitals are established on all islands and all natives suffering from unsightly sores, so common in these islands, are glad to take up their residence there and are perfectly cured in many cases. I am glad to say that no reluctance exists here, as in the case of Fiji, to receive medical treatment in a Government hospital.

14. The establishment of so great a labour centre as is Ocean Island, so close to their homes, is of course a feature of the greatest importance in their lives and in their whole economy. The old and spartan simplicity of the standard of living, which was maintained upon the almost exclusive diet of cocoanuts, pandanus, and fish, has vanished before the cultivated taste which demands rice, meat, sugar, and biscuits, and which is inclined to scorn the simple food of a former generation. Clothes of shocking shape and of atrocious colour have almost replaced the picturesque kilt of leaves or fine woven mat, and in their canoes, now no longer laboriously sewn together of small and narrow cocoanut planks, but constructed of American or Australian timbers, the really beautiful mat sail has given place to a canvas substitute which is made on a sewing machine purchased at Ocean Island.

15. The rapid decline of the simple arts and crafts among the natives is to be much regretted and tends to accentuate the extreme monotony of their lives.

16. The local conditions in these islands are wholly different from those in any other group of islands under the jurisdiction of Your Excellency. It is a mistake of not infrequent occurrence to compare conditions in the Solomon Islands, the New Hebrides, or the Tongan Archipelago with those in these uniformly flat coral atolls. Every difference which can be imagined exists and the results of these differences are clearly apparent in the characters of the natives and in their manner of life. Here the highest land in the Protectorate is not elevated over 20 feet above high water mark, nor is the broadest island more than half a mile across. There are lofty mountains and considerable masses of land. Here are few safe or commodious harbours; there they abound. Landing here can only be effected by long wading over great coral flats beneath the torrid equatorial sun; there ships may anchor close beside densely wooded and shady beaches in waters perfectly protected from the winds on every side. Here the natural food consists of the products of two trees, the cocoanut and pandanus, and of fish, in which these reef-bound islands are extraordinarily rich; there the variety of food is much greater and in quantity far more abundant. Here natives are restricted to their own island and cannot venture to visit their neighbours because the equatorial current runs with irregular but at times extraordinary strength, and, since hundreds of lives have been lost in canoes which have been drifted away and never seen again, the Government has wisely decreed that all inter-island voyages save in the trading steamers are unlawful; there inter-island communication is frequent and free and the natives of one island are in constant communication with their neighbours.

17. The results of this isolation may be seen in the character of the race. While the natives are naturally most intelligent, their manner of life induces a certain apathy and makes against any manifestation of originality or any display of individualism.

18. I had been under the impression that the Gilbert Islanders alone of the native inhabitants of the Pacific were not subject to the prevailing decrease which is marked in every group of islands. I regret to say that the decrease of the native population has set in here also and is well marked on almost every island of the group. Imported diseases, the wearing of unsuitable clothes, the alarming increase of phthisis, too close a system of inter-marriage, monotony of life, poverty of the food supply, and, finally, the new feature of the disinclination of the women to bear more than a limited number of children and the increased and increasing number of sterile marriages—all these affect the population and accelerate its diminution.

19. The white population of the group, with the exception of that portion of it which is engaged in missionary enterprise or which consists of servants of the Protectorate Government, ekes out a precarious existence. Competition has greatly increased with improved communication. There are now three steamers plying

regularly through the group. The firm of On Chong and Company introduces many Chinese traders, and their extremely frugal habits of life enable them to compete successfully against the improvident class of white men who are trading with the natives. The number of traders on the individual islands is, I consider, altogether excessive, and precludes the possibility of any of them making more than a bare living. I may say that they buy from the natives for one penny and sell to the steamers for one penny and a half per pound, and upon the narrow margin thus provided upon the annual sale of 40 or 50 tons of copra they must pay for food and clothing and meet all their other expenses.

20. I think that some system of restricting the issue of licences should be adopted, and I have addressed a circular to the various District Magistrates on the subject. The influx of Chinese is quite remarkable, but it can be readily explained by their well-known habits of economy and the fact that they can make a living where a white man cannot.

21. I do not think that any considerable increase in the output of copra, which is the sole article of export in these islands, is to be anticipated; and even the present supply will probably be adversely affected by the drought which now prevails in the central division of the group.

22. But the continued decrease of the native population will at no very distant date permit the leasing of comparatively large tracts of land on many of the islands, which should make extremely valuable cocoanut plantations, and should prove veritable mines of wealth to their fortunate possessors. It is not generally known that the native population of the Gilbert Islands consumes daily about seven cocoanuts per caput, and when this is done by some 25,000 people the amount of copra which might be made were this consumption to be reduced is apparent. It seems probable that the islands of Apemama, Kuria, and Annanuka will be amongst the first which will be open for leases of any considerable size. They are particularly rich in cocoanuts and the population is dwindling at a very rapid rate. Almost no children are born on Apemama, for reasons which the natives cannot or will not explain.

23. I may here perhaps remind Your Excellency of the constitution and functions of the different island Governments. The system at present in vogue has been maintained ever since the proclamation of the Protectorate and has been well adapted to the needs and understandings of the natives. In islands where there is a hereditary high chief he is usually recognised, and he commonly sits as president of the "Bowi" (cf. Fijian "Bose") or island parliament. The next official of importance is the magistrate, who is usually picked as the most intelligent native whose services can be secured, and his duty is to administer the excellent code of island laws. He is assisted by the "scribe," whose duty it is to keep all the island books in order, and this is no light task. The books comprise cash book, court book, land register, registers of births, deaths, and marriages, and the tax accounts. On the whole these books are kept well and generally quite up to date. The other native Government officials are a chief policeman, village police (usually one or two for each village), a gaoler, and a wardress to look after the prisoners (male and female), and, finally, and only in recent times, a hospital orderly who takes charge of the native patients in the island hospital, dispenses the drugs, and always resides, or should reside, close outside the hospital fence.

24. The officials detailed above are all paid from the land tax—which is now the only form of taxation paid by the natives. There remain the unpaid members of the native parliament, who are for the most part content to remain unpaid when the fact is explained to them that in England membership of parliament was formerly held so great an honour that payment was never thought of. These are the Kaubure, "Advisers" or "Talking-men." In former days they were usually chosen from among the older natives and were a somewhat argumentative body, although they were loyal enough once they were convinced; and they certainly had a considerable amount of authority with the natives, who have the respect of a primitive people for the opinion of the "Old men."

25. The Kaubure are now recruited from among the younger men, who may be supposed to be more progressive, less dilatory, and less wedded to ancient customs and methods, but who are certainly less interesting and have less authority among the people. It is, I fancy, a rare thing for any of the modern Kaubure to differ from the opinion of any European Government Officer, or if he differs, to have the courage of his opinions and the ability to explain and maintain them. Such "Village Hampdens" were not unknown in former years, were often useful in

making suggestions, and could generally be trusted to give good reasons for any view which they held. This class of "Old man" seems to be rapidly passing away.

26. The assembly, or "Bowi," constituted as above, High Chief, Magistrate, Scribe, Chief Policeman, and Kaubure, meets at regular intervals, generally once a month, at the principal village and discusses the various matters connected with the island. The extreme monotony of the lives of the natives would seem *prima facie* to preclude the possibility of many topics for discussion, but the Gilbert Islander is, probably because he has little else to do, the most wonderful talker in all the South Seas. Possessed of a voice which Achilles might have envied, he is fond of using it, and these meeting are usually marked by animated, and what seem to a stranger most heated, discussions.

27. It is well for these orators that there always remains the eternal land problem which can be discussed. In these narrow islands with their dense populations the various land holdings have been divided and subdivided in a most extraordinary way. The land registers which are now regularly kept show thousands of small holdings, each termed a "piece" of land, which may be any size from a few yards square to a couple of acres.

28. These lands, which have descended to the natives from their ancestors or been taken in war, or acquired as the result of some faction fight or, in some cases, as the punishment of some grave crime against the community, are all delimitated with quite extraordinary accuracy, and although of the most varied shapes and apparently inextricably involved among other holdings are perfectly well known and can be described with the most wonderful accuracy by their owners. I fear that I may be considered as guilty of exaggeration when I state what is a well-known fact and one which has been proved over and over again, namely, that the natives not only know the complicated limits of their lands thus perfectly, but also that, in the case where the land bears cocoanuts, they are able to identify the nuts from the trees growing on that land. I have myself seen this done on more than one occasion, the owner having picked out his own from a heap at a trader's station, and the native who had stolen them having confessed to the theft, because he knew that the owner was perfectly correct in his recognition of the stolen property.

29. It follows that the smallest encroachment on any piece of land is jealously noted and clamorously complained of. Natives who have been absent from their island return to find that their boundaries have not been respected, and the rich and powerful encroach at times on the lands of their poorer neighbours. The succession to the land is complicated by debatable family diversions, and finally the great source of trouble is the leaving of the lands to the "Tibun."

30. The institution of the system of "Tibun" or adoption is, I believe, a very ancient one among the Gilbert Islanders. It was and is resorted to by natives who found that they were being neglected by relations in their old age, and it was also used by couples who had no children of their own. In the first case a boy or girl would be formally adopted by the person who desired assistance in the preparation of food, or in the cultivation of lands which were his or her property, and on the death of the adopter the "Tibun" or adopted relative was frequently left a large portion of the adopter's lands. The adoption often took place against the wishes, as it was clearly against the interests, of the relations of the adopter and was often done in a spirit of pique or as a punishment for real or fancied slights.

31. In former times, when relations were able to appeal to force to evict the adopted relative from the possession of lands to which they held he had no right, the custom was somewhat held in check and the evils to which it gave rise were not so apparent.

32. But now that the fear of the law is universal and violence seldom resorted to, these adopted relations inherit quantities of land, to the damage of the "de jure" owners, and much bitterness of feeling is the result.

33. The case of the childless couples who adopt children is less open to dispute, although even then there are often great heart burnings, since land in these islands is held in common by a family and its alienation from that family means loss of prestige and consideration.

34. In almost every island I visited such cases were brought to my notice and complaints were made by aggrieved persons. I think that in some of the islands a local regulation admits of the alienation of only a certain portion of the testator's land to a "Tibun" for services rendered during the testator's life.

35. Some uniformity of practice should be arrived at; the total abolition of the custom would be unfortunate, since it would release the relations of the old from the necessity to minister to their wants by removing the only means of retaliation which remains to the neglected old people.

36. But so long as the system remains even thus modified it is impossible that there should ever be peace concerning the native lands, for the "family" always maintain that the bequest made to the "Tibun" is excessive and unjust to them, while the "Tibun" is inclined to overestimate the importance of his services and to consider that they have been inadequately rewarded. The result is that lands are always in dispute, and these controversies form at least nine-tenths of the matters which a Government official is called upon to settle.

37. On the whole, however, the lands are sufficient for the support of the people, more particularly since the large numbers of food-bearing trees which have been planted throughout the islands by the direct order of the Administration are producing their crops. Cocoanuts are still stored in times of drought; a wise precaution and one which has saved many lives in the past.

38. Your Excellency will find in the appendix* to this report all the detailed information which I have been able to collect, and I need not greatly prolong this already somewhat lengthy report, by inflicting upon you the details of my tour. I was favoured by fine weather and we had not westerly wind, which makes the landing upon many of these islands an impossibility. But, even with this good fortune, the disembarkation upon these atolls is always a prolonged operation. At some of them the ship anchored six or seven miles off the land and the services of an antiquated and asthmatic launch are so little to be trusted that I have taken four and a half hours to get from an anchorage to the shore. At other islands one must wade knee deep at all times save at the moment of high water across coral flats of from a half to three-quarters of a mile in extent. At others one is precipitated through a narrow and dangerous passage by a breaking sea on the surface of a rough and rocky reef, and these landings are always attended with a certain amount of risk and would never be possible were it not for the incomparable skill of the native boat's crew.

39. From such places it is not surprising that news is irregular and often wholly wanting. No one who has not made a tour of these islands can imagine the difficulty in keeping in touch with them which has been experienced in the past.

40. Their condition is upon the whole satisfactory so far as the natives are concerned, and were it not for the prevalence of sickness amongst them and for the fact that a period of decrease seems to have set in, it would be perfectly so.

41. A relatively high level has been reached under Mr. Campbell's administration in so far as the material condition of the natives is concerned, but in the face of the impending decadence of the race sustained effort will be needed and a careful, just, and sympathetic treatment must be accorded to the natives if they are to be preserved in their most curious and most interesting islands.

Ellice Islands.

42. These natives have been far less visited than their neighbours in the Gilbert group, and their real condition and needs have not been fully comprehended. Steamers have usually only called at some of the islands. The number of white traders has decreased in recent years and the absence of the pick of the adult male population upon Ocean Island and as sailormen on board the various island steamers has much diminished the output of copra from the group.

43. The difference of the race and the fact that the intensity of the struggle for the survival of the fittest is far less acute in these moister, more fertile, and less populated islands, have produced the remarkable dissimilarity which exists between these natives and those of the Gilbert group.

44. Language, canoes, houses, are all distinct; the manners of the gentler Polynesian, his physical beauty and softer and more liquid language, are in pleasing contrast to the rough, loud-voiced, clamorous and excitable Gilbert Islander, who seems to me to belong to a division of the human race so totally distinct from the Polynesian that the term "Micronesian," properly applied to him, should never be used in connection with his near neighbour in the "Little islands" of the Ellice group.

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* Not printed.

45. The admirable character of the Ellice islander is shown by the almost total absence of crime in these rarely visited islands, and for this characteristic of the people less credit has been given to the London Missionary Society and to its Samoan teachers than they have deserved. It is quite true that in the earlier days of the Protectorate these Samoans were often found to be interfering with the native government and that some friction with the London Missionary Society was the result. But it should be remembered that these teachers had lived for years among these islands before the advent of the Protectorate and that, by their example and precept, they had procured the most excellent results. Exceptions, of course, occurred, and some teachers were inclined to gratify the autocratic tendencies of Samoan chiefs at the expense of ignorant natives. Yet it cannot be denied that the excellent character of the Ellice Islander has been developed by their teachings and that the virtues of the race and their peaceable and amiable disposition are abiding monuments to the labours of the mission.

46. Few features are more remarkable in the Ellice Islands to-day than the absence of the white trader. In 1896, when I visited the group first, I think that there were such traders upon every island and some of them making a fair living at the business. The death of Mr. Kleis on Nui has removed the last European trader from the group and only two white denizens remain, belonging to that happily now almost extinct class, the "beach-comber."

47. To replace the absence of the European trader the steamers now buy their copra direct from the natives, giving them a fair but not a generous price for their produce. The natives are endeavouring to start small "companies" for the purpose of trading, and the system seems to work satisfactorily, or at least I heard no complaint from the natives on any of the islands where these companies exist.

48. The poverty of these islands has been, I think, greatly exaggerated and for two reasons; the first is the comparatively small population and the apparent inferiority in the domestic economy of the native population; their houses are less elaborate, their canoes less well-built, but in cocoanuts, and comparatively speaking, these people are at least as well off as, if they be not really richer than, their neighbours in the Gilbert Islands. Funafuti, Nukufetau, and Nukulailai are capable of producing a far larger quantity of copra than is at present the case. Vaitupu is an extremely rich island, as is Nui, while Nuitau and Nanomaga are by no means poor. Nanomea, by reason of its large population, is not a rich island, but with that exception there is no island in the group which could not bear an increase of taxation, were it necessary, without hardship and without distress.

49. The other reason for the supposed poverty of these islands is to be found in the depreciatory attitude which the natives always adopt, when speaking of themselves or their property. This fashion, which is borrowed from the elaborate etiquette of Samoa, has no doubt been introduced from that country by the mission teachers. To magnify the importance and position of one's visitor and to decry all that might concern one's self is a feature in Samoan manners, and the phrase "ua tele le mativa," or "we are poor people," is one of the commonest in the mouth of the Ellice Islander upon occasions of ceremony.

50. After forty-three days spent on the s.s. "Muniara" and in visiting all the islands of the Protectorate, I returned to Ocean Island on March 3rd.

51. I take this opportunity of acknowledging the consideration and courtesy shown to me by the firm of Messrs. Burns Philp, who did everything in their power to facilitate my journey. They diverted the usual course of the vessel, they visited and re-visited islands to suit my convenience, and for all this they did not increase their charges, so that the whole voyage in their steamer from January 6th to March 3rd cost but £30.

I have, &c.,
ARTHUR MAHAFFY,
Assistant to the High Commissioner.

His Excellency
The High Commissioner
for the Western Pacific.

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Shri Brihad Bhartiya Samaj
on 31 October, 2019

AFRICA. No. 3 (1902).

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IN

SOMALILAND

AND CONSEQUENT

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